

Esther Hamburger

## Wired Up to the World: Performance and Media in Contemporary Brazil<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Performance, Television and Film: the Case of *Bus 174*

On July 12 year 2000, in the Jardim Botânico upper middle class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro city, Sandro do Nascimento, a young black man, was the protagonist of what would become a spectacular event of violence. Surrounded by police, what apparently started as a “small act of robbery” inside a regular urban bus became a threatening scenario, a dangerous stage, where aside from the hijacker and his victims, a series of Rio de Janeiro policemen and state government officials performed to the media. During four hours, from afternoon to early evening, television crews present at the scene transmitted the progress of the case live to the whole country. At the end of this bad thriller two people – the hijacker and two month pregnant 23 years old teacher Geísa – died. They were shot live on national television.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of a wider project about the politics of representation and different forms of “appropriation” of television and film apparatus in contemporary Brazil,<sup>3</sup> this paper focuses on film *Ônibus 174* (*Bus number 174*), a documentary made a couple of years later which reviews and contextualizes the brutal events of that day. The film by director José Padilha places TV reportage in perspective. An assemblage of television footage, expo facto reports by privileged participants, such as hostages, the “SWAT” officer who was in charge of the operation, former friends and family of the protagonist, social

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1 Preliminary versions of this work were presented in the Annual meeting of So-cine, Brazilian Cinema Studies Association (Salvador, Brazil, November 2003) and in the São Paulo International Conference of Documentaries (March 2004), and published as “Políticas da representação: ficção e documentário em *Ônibus 174*” In: Mourao/Labaki (2005: 196-215).

2 Detailed description of Rio de Janeiro’s newspapers coverage of the event in Silva, Cristina Dias da (2004).

3 “Inclusion and Exclusion: the Politics of Representation in a São Paulo *favela*” is funded by CNPq, the Brazilian National Research Council.

workers who knew him, as well as drug dealers, policemen and specialists who did not have any direct connection with this specific case, the film constitutes privileged material for research about the relations between the media, public visibility, violence and performance in contemporary Brazil.

The term “appropriation” here designates different ways through which subjects represented in the media as this “other” – who is associated with violence, poverty and race – control the ways their image appears on the screen. The hypothesis of the project is that different ways and degrees of “appropriation” assume specific aesthetical forms, and express different relations which filmmakers establish with their subjects. Within this broader framework, *Bus number 174* presents a “perverse” form of “appropriation”. During a whole afternoon and early evening, the performance of Sandro, the protagonist here, galvanized television and the other media. As he became aware of the fact that he was at the center of the scene, his performance privileged this unique chance to speak up, in detriment of his own chances of survival. In this sense, his action can be analyzed as one – perverse – form of appropriation, first of live television, later of documentary film. Before turning to the film itself, I will start with a brief field-work-inspired discussion of the conceptual framework of the project in construction, followed by a brief description of the ways in which *favelas* appear in the history of the Brazilian scene which will be useful for understanding current shifts. Discussion of the case of *Bus 174* is then followed by sketches of other forms of “appropriation” of the means of representation which are present in other films. Unsolved questions about how to represent violence without reinforcing prejudice and discrimination conclude the paper.

## **2. Politics of Representation in Contemporary Brazil: a Broader Research Project**

Urban violence, poverty and race have appeared as intrinsically connected themes in the recent boom of Brazilian film. These themes gained a sort of “hyper visibility” in the media<sup>4</sup> that contrasts with

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4 Recent Brazilian film has been subject to different interpretations, some of them with emphasis on the shift of meaning in the representation of “favelas”. See for

their relative invisibility during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Film and television treatment of violence, poverty and race has provoked intense debate involving directors, musicians, critics and social movements. Questions in this debate revolve around the accuracy of filmic representation, the eventual excess of violence that would reinforce stereotyped images of the poor, mistaken images of violence as the only possible account of daily life in poor neighborhoods and non-legitimate appropriation of local images.

This paper participates in this debate as part of a wider project which focuses on film and television representations of violence and poverty as an intrinsic dimension of the Brazilian contemporary social problem. The hypothesis here is that certain films and television programs express different forms of contemporary “appropriation” of the mechanisms of producing audiovisual representation of urban poverty and violence. The idea here is to relate different forms of representation to the different ways in which the people who represent and/or are represented in each specific work perform. The ways in which people perform in the process of filming – including rehearsal, rewritings of the script, sound track, *mise-en-scène*, etc. express different games of appropriation of the mechanisms of constructing representation.

This research is supported by continuing ethnographic experience in a *favela* in São Paulo since the end of the 1990s<sup>5</sup> and is the result of my professional trajectory – departing from urban anthropology to the study and critique of audiovisual representations. My field experience in the late 1990s suggested that inhabitants of the *favela* were connected to the world through television and radio reception. They were also aware of their relative invisibility in the media. Moreover they attempted to appropriate the means of producing their own representations of themselves and the world. In the early 2000s, amidst a broader process of change, still largely unknown, this situation of relative invisibility shifted (Hamburger 2003: 104-115). Different forms of

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example Bentes, Ivana (2003); Ramos, Fernão Pessoa (2003); Xavier, Ismail (2003). For the place of violence in Cinema Novo see Xavier, Ismail (1983).

5 The project I refer to here is called: “The impact of television on reproductive behaviour in Brazil”, carried out by a consortium of research institutes which included researchers from CEBRAP/São Paulo, University of Texas, CEDEPLAR-UFMG, NEPO-UNICAMP, ECA-USP, was financed by Rockefeller, Mellon, Hewlett Packard, and MacArthur Foundations.

emergent representation include viewing local television sensational newscasts, performing in popular “shows de auditório”, taking part in NGO experiences of local video production, community radio projects, local home video production, as well as starting an acting and/or singing show business career. Successful hip-hop groups have done sound tracks of recent films such as “City of God” or “O Invasor”.

Early fieldwork information suggested that the main notions that feed this ongoing project, and will be tested in the interpretation of different films and programs, such as “the politics of representation” and the “appropriation of the mechanisms of producing representation”. In short, the project discusses the idea that the dispute for the control of what is broadcast, how and in what media is strategic in the contemporary metropolis. Moreover the idea is to call attention to the fact that black and poor *favela* inhabitants take part in this dispute through different attempts to interact with the media. Dispute over the control of what is represented, how and where, defines the relationship that people from different social classes and professional segments maintain with various audiovisual formats, such as TV programs (the news, reality programs, soap operas), documentaries and/or fictional films.

Roughly, the idea is that in different ways, which are still under investigation, people try to appropriate the mechanisms of producing representation. And different aesthetic arrangements capture and express different forms of this appropriation. By becoming a candidate to take part in “reality shows” such as “Big Brother”, by writing a book about the poor neighborhood where you live (which eventually might become a movie), by writing and interpreting rap songs (which can become TV or film soundtracks), or by participating in audiovisual workshops in poor neighborhoods or in prisons, people aim to be included in the universe of the visible – an universe which sometimes is framed as the universe of the “spectacle”.

In the theoretical horizon of the project figures the problematization of the notion of “spectacle” in itself. From the perspective of film and television makers, the question is how to represent violence without reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Producing representation of poverty and violence nowadays means dealing with images that play a strategic role in the interplay of social relations and representations.

If the hypothesis of different ongoing forms of appropriation of the mechanisms of producing representation is correct, the idea that contemporary social relations should be understood in terms of the “society of the spectacle” – roughly understood as this almost independent universe, which would fascinate and alienate people – would be questioned by the idea that even though unequal and distorted, interaction rather than separation would mark relations between viewers and films and/or television programs. Different kinds of continuity – some more perverse than others – would mark relations between viewers, people represented and professionals who work on the construction of representation. Different forms of “appropriation” of the mechanisms of producing representation range from aesthetically oriented political actions that aim at television exposure, such as 9/11 (Hamburger 2003: 49-60), to films that construct their verisimilitude based on the body movement and oral language of endogenous casts, scripts that are based in insider reports, local sound tracks, etc.

### 3. Favelas, Poverty and Violence in the Brazilian Audiovisual Scene

*Favelas* have been present in Brazilian films since early years. In the 1950s and 1960s, poor neighborhoods were connected with blacks, carnival, samba, afro-religion cults. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s poor urban landscapes were absent from the impoverished cinema scene, as well as from affluent television screen. The above-mentioned films disrupt this relative invisibility.

Modern Brazilian film emerged in connection with *favelas*. With *Rio 40 graus* (1954) and *Rio Zona Norte* (1957) both directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Brazilian film acquired the streets of the city, leaving classic scripts and studio settings behind.<sup>6</sup> Two productions, by foreign directors with local connections, inspired by these breakthrough films, deal with *favelas*– samba and carnival. *Orfeu do Carnaval* (1959) by French director Marcel Camus, based on the play by

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6 In 1935 Humberto Mauro directed *Favela de meus amores*, a film that unfortunately did not survive. About Brazilian modern film see Calil, Carlos Augusto (2002). About *favelas* in the history of Brazilian cinema see Bentes, Ivana (2003). About Nelson Pereira and the relationship between his films and Italian Neo-realismo, see Fabris, Mariarosaria (1994).

Vinícius de Moraes won the Palm d'Or in Cannes. Years later, *Fábulas* (1965), by Swiss Arne Sucksdorff with the help of some of his students at the film course provided by Itamaraty, the Foreign Affairs Department, was also shown in Cannes. Between these two “foreign” films, *Cinco Vezes Favela* (1962) by Marcos Faria, Miguel Borges, Carlos Diegues, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade and Leon Hirszman, expresses five “cinema novo” images of Rio de Janeiro *favelas*. The five short fiction films bring documentary images of the city with special attention to blacks, black kids, *favelas*, carnival and music. All these films contemplate some kind of violence. “Favela boys” who face several acts of daily violence while selling peanuts around tourist places in *Rio 40 graus*. “Favela boys” who make money by stealing cats in bourgeois houses, or simply catching street cats, and selling the animals to *tamborim* makers who use their skin in *Couro de Gato*. A youth gang which robs and kills fellow friends in the neighborhood in *Rio Zona Norte*. Local bandits who kill Eurídice in *Orfeu do carnaval*. Violence was there to signalize that black *favelas* were not idyllic places of music, dance and sensuality. Violence was there as if to allegorically suggest that class conflict and discrimination intrinsically embodied and signified violence.

Although violence and poverty were represented in many fiction films of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Hector Babenco's *Lúcio Flávio, passageiro da agonia* and *Pixote*, the focus was on prison, police, and correction institutions, rather than on daily life in *favelas*. In those years and until the late 1990s, popular neighborhoods have been condemned to a certain “invisibility”. Weakness of documentary reinforces this sense of invisibility. Even though during these years many documentaries were shot in *favelas*, this local blooming got little broadcast, because in Brazil, television – the main producer and exhibitor of documentaries worldwide – has completely ignored the genre.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past 40 years, with rare exceptions, structural limitations to documentary production have enhanced the invisibility of popular segments living in large cities. Especially on television, this invisibility was, and still is, an expression of discrimination. At the same time,

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7 For a panorama of documentary in Brasil see Teixeira, Francisco Elinaldo (2004).

in recent years, as the illegal traffic of weapons and drugs has dominated poor neighborhoods, documenting *favelas* has become a “security” issue. Local leaders have attempted to control the production of images about their communities. In the 1990s, Cacá Diegues’ remake of *Orfeu* was shot on a specially built *favela*. Nowadays, in order to shoot in these locations one needs their permission.

During the 1970s and 1980s, when television consolidated itself as a popular and lucrative vehicle of an expanding industry with international connections, urban sceneries of poverty and violence were absent from the screen. Telenovelas (Brazilian daily soaps) are well-known for their glamorous characters and sceneries (Kehl 1986; Leal 1986; Sarques 1986). Even though they are shot on location, they rarely use *favela* locations. As regards TV news, during the military years, the tone was official, i.e. newscasts talked basically about government actions. Poor neighborhoods and their inhabitants were not considered newsworthy. Television news focused on ‘great events involving great personalities’. This rigid and formal agenda was coherently represented in an “objective” news style: fixed images, with a steady hand, edited in a clean, fast, and conventional way.

Black people rarely appeared on the television screen, in news or in fiction.<sup>8</sup> The country that television portrayed was white, peaceful and affluent. The official image privileged rich scenarios, where consumption of goods abounded. Fictional plots involved cases of crime and drama, but the tonic was romance, in general a privileged path to social ascension. At the end of 1980s, television fiction started to question 1960s and 1970s “developmentist” optimism. In so doing, these popular electronic *feuilletons* anticipated public treatment of issues that would dominate the political agenda of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as political corruption.<sup>9</sup>

In 1991, *Aqui, agora* (Here and now) an early evening television local news program, aired on SBT channel, disrupted previous conventions by introducing poor urban landscapes where ordinary people performed cases of domestic violence, as well as small scale conflicts – among neighbors or against companies which allegedly violated

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8 On the slight presence of blacks on Brazilian TV see Araújo, Joel Zito (2000), book and film.

9 For an analysis about the relationship between telenovelas and politics in Brazilian recent history see Hamburger, Esther (1999).

consumers rights. *Aqui, agora* legitimated popular urban landscapes as sceneries for news programs recorded on location and with reporters and cameramen on the move. Shaky images produced by professionals who were out of breath while climbing up the hills transmitted the sense of immediacy, and contributed to reinforcing the impression of “hot news”, transmitted live. *Aqui, agora* reporters went out of the studios “in search of the news where it actually happened”. In contrast with the official tone of conventional coverage, *Aqui, agora* transformed matters related to small conflicts and local crime into news. This short-lived program inspired similar newscasts in rival networks such as Record and Bandeirantes, but it also proposed aesthetic and thematic reformulation of television news with repercussions in Globo,<sup>10</sup> and perhaps, in film. In the nineties, despite its good ratings, SBT took *Aqui, agora* off the air, due to the program’s low commercial value, given advertisers resistance to invest in what was considered a lowbrow program.

In the nineties representations of violence and urban poverty, specifically *favelas*, returned to film, but in a different register.<sup>11</sup> American film director Spike Lee shot a Michael Jackson clip in a Rio de Janeiro *favela*.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the 1990s and incorporating images from popular television newscasts, the documentary *News of a private war* started a new trend.

In the 1950s and 1960s, *favelas* appeared in films as inhabited by “malandros”, i.e. characters who aimed to take advantage of everything, who lived out of “smart” small illegalities, for whom life was to be lived with good humor. At the beginning of the nineties, *Aqui, agora* caused public opinion impact by bringing the ‘peripheries’ to televisual display. In the late 1990s, *favelas* reappeared as privileged landscapes for gang dispute, for drug dealers and, to quote the policeman in Salles’s film, who coined the expression that named the film, for this “private war”.<sup>13</sup> *News of a private war*’s co-director, Brazil-

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10 On ‘Aqui, Agora’ see Jabor, Arnaldo (1991). See also Bentes, Ivana (1994), and Hamburger, Esther (1995).

11 For comparison between the ‘cinema novo’ of the early 1960s and the ‘revival cinema’ see Ramos, Fernão Pessoa (2003); Xavier, Ismail (1983), and Bentes, Ivana (2003).

12 On Michael Jackson’s clip see Vieira, João Luiz (2004).

13 Poverty and violence were not absent from cinema in the 1970s and 1980s.



ian-American Kátia Lund, also co-directed the celebrated and Oscar-nominated *City of God*. The links between the two films do not stop there. There had been attempts before, but *News of a private war* is the first film to follow the track opened by popular TV news, i.e. to enter and actually register the otherwise invisible true war that goes on in Rio de Janeiro *favelas*. The film registered the director's surprise with this next door, then unknown, to hell. Only a couple of years later, *Bus 174* further developed the subject.

#### 4. *Bus 174*

The structure of *Bus 174* is similar to the structure of the incisive documentary *Notícias de uma guerra particular* (*News of a private war*) by João Moreira Salles, which José Padilha edited.<sup>14</sup> Both films articulate conflicting elements of a tragic situation in an attempt to express complexities which resist easy explanations. *Notícias* contrasts views by people who are with the police with reports by drug dealers (men who are with the *movimento*) and with reports by *favela* inhabitants who do not align with any side. *Ônibus 174* adds a forth perspective: the media.

*Notícias de uma guerra particular* (1999) offered the first reflexive glance at an universe that, at that time, was still only visible through the sensational lenses of popular TV news programs. The documentary, aired on cable television,<sup>15</sup> resulted from the director's initial project of filming a NGO project, a *favela* dancing company. As his crew did research among the young dancers, they came across daily violence on an unprecedented scale. Instead of a film about ballet, Salles' film revealed to Brazilians who do not live in poor neighborhoods, and who have access to cable television and news papers, the barbarism already in place in Rio de Janeiro *favelas*. The film was possible thanks to an agreement between filmmaker and drug dealers, who not only allowed shooting, but also agreed to take part in

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14 *Notícias de uma guerra particular* was one of the first documentary films in the 1990s to deal with the universe of violence and drugs in Rio de Janeiro *favelas*.

15 Due to high costs and low availability, very few viewers have access to cable television, therefore only a few viewers saw this documentary. Nonetheless the film influenced other film makers to deal with the subject further.

the project. Later on this illegal interchange was questioned by legal authorities.

Only four years later, *Bus 174* came out amidst a “boom” of documentaries and fiction films that bring to light this world, submerged up to the early 1990s. The interplay between all these films expresses the intense ongoing dispute over the control of representation. Titles such as *Invasor*, *Cidade de Deus*, *Cidade dos Homens*, *Carandiru*, or *Prisioneiros da Grade de Ferro* can be interpreted as different specific cases of appropriation of the mechanisms of control over production of filmic representation about poverty and violence.

*News* and *Bus 174* present similar formal structure. Both films create a hyper-dramatic atmosphere by contrasting different point of views about life in contemporary Rio de Janeiro *favelas*. Drug dealers, policemen, ordinary people in the first, and the three plus the media, in the second, have their perspectives analytically confronted. Both films are punctuated by grave instrumental music – a narrative element that reinforces the tragic picture. By articulating different – sometimes opposing, even enemies’ perspectives – both films adopt a comprehensive perspective which goes beyond simple melodramatic keys such as ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Nonetheless, they both emphasize the difficult nature of a no-way-out situation. It is not a coincidence that both documentaries end in the cemetery. *News* with a parallel montage of enemy funerals: a policeman and a drug dealer – both killed in combat. The final sequence confirms the tragic superiority of death with a steady shot of a cemetery white wall which slowly fills up and turns black, with names and dates of thousands of victims of this “private war”. *Bus 174* finishes with the solitary funeral of Sandro, the boy who at five saw his mother’s murder, some years later survived the Candelária massacre in Rio, was kept in the ‘Padre Severino’ reformatory (the same reformatory, with very similar takes of naked and humiliated male bodies, appears in *News*). Captain Pimentel, the policeman whose statement suggests the title of *News*, is also interviewed in *Bus 174*. It is possible that some interviewees who concealed their identity, using similar masks – are also in both films.

Both films use the strategy of articulating successive fragments without the use of the classic outside voice-over of an “objective” narrator who makes sense of the images, which in their turn are care-

fully chosen as good illustrations.<sup>16</sup> Careful editing alternates speeches that express different positions, sometimes even antagonistic positions. As a result a complex, panoramic but comprehensive view emerges: one which recognizes – and legitimates – existent opposing views concerning the same dramatic situation.

The four years separating the two films are the years of the so called “revival” of Brazilian film, both fictional and documentary. But they were also crucial for the passage from the invisibility, characteristic of the previous decades, to a series of diversified documental experiences that gave visibility to the universe of the urban popular classes. Both films express representation principles adopted in this new phase of Brazilian cinema. Violence, present in the allegorical register of the films made in the ‘cinema novo’ era, emerges with force in the contemporary documentary production. Violence appears in documentary-like images, as an endemic force that polarizes disputes over the control of representation.

By taking television archive material as his prime material José Padilha’s film brings elements that stimulate us to think about audiovisual representation, television and film. Television footage of the occasion guide the film, in its chronological reconstruction of the event. Archive material was edited in a way as to foster our understanding of the situation. The idea here is that a film, done after the fact, with the benefits of distance, in time and space, both in production and reception, can contribute to putting the television event in perspective, to foster our understanding of the tragedy, to stimulate the formation of an enlightened public opinion, which should be able to escape Manichaeian views of the drama, especially a possible dominant interpretation that would approve the police’s attitude of killing the aggressor.

Documentary film in this case should be able to contextualize the event, to give voice to participants, in ways that live coverage cannot

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16 In *Cineastas e imagens do povo*, Jean Claude Bernadet (2004) analyses Brazilian documentaries produced in the early sixties with a particular emphasis on the ways in which different films express particular relations between directors, who shoot, and the people represented in the screen. The book brings an insightful analysis of the use of the narrator in what he calls the sociological model. Contemporary films do not use voice-over narrative. Nonetheless, perhaps they keep other traces of the sociological model.

do. The analytical general view proposed in the film can be noticed right from the beginning, with the panoramic shallow flight over the city of Rio de Janeiro, pointing out the social differences registered in the urban geography, the beach and the hills (the *favelas*), until its arrival at the Botanical Gardens, approaching the scene of the crime.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the film, sequences of television material, recorded live on the day of the hijacking, are intercut with archive material, such as the police/criminal record of Sandro, news published in the press about his mother's death, the Candelária massacre, in addition to countless interviews with hostages of the bus, policemen, journalists, drug dealers, real relatives or relatives by affinity, professionals who took care of him as psychologists, social workers and a capoeira teacher.

Although not exactly in the same order, the film follows very closely the chronological script of the protagonist's life, reconstituting his trajectory, not as the cruel man or violent criminal pictured on live television at the time, but as a victim of an unfair, violent and unjust society where he lived. The complex scenery composed of different and sometimes contradictory perspectives ends up, as much as in *News of a private war*, by creating a complex picture with no way out. The almost solitary burial of a boy illegally strangled inside a police car (the only moment, after hours of negotiation, when television cameras were absent) was accompanied by a lady, also solitary, who presented herself as the person who Sandro (already an adult) adopted as a mother, and to whom he promised to "be someone". No blood family; appealing tragic soundtrack.

Instead of the audience of millions who in 2000 followed live coverage of the event, the film had a modest audience in Brazil. It succeeds in making the viewer – usually an upper middle class Brazilian – feel at least a little bit co-responsible – for omission, or for being complacent with stereotypes that associates blackness, poverty, ignorance, criminality and violence – a social context which, ultimately, would have murdered Sandro.

Beyond what perhaps could be thought of as an overdramatic structure, which duplicates, at the other extreme, the stereotype of the

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17 See Bentes, Ivana (2004) for a comparison with other films which open with similar aerial shots of Rio de Janeiro.

algoz, which associates black carioca poor male kids with violence, by presenting a decent and legitimate picture of a poor black who at the age of five saw his mother being slaughtered, a couple of years later survived a police massacre and who finally was killed by police abuse, the film offers excellent material to think about the relationship between citizens who belong to an almost invisible society and the mechanisms of producing representation such as photographic cameras and TVs.

*Bus 174* discusses a “mediatic phenomena”. The presence of cameras transformed a robbery of small dimensions into a national event with international repercussion. And different reports on the event reveal unexpected critical perspectives, such as the one by a masked character. This drug-dealer, who protects his face for obvious reasons, does not approve of Sandro’s operation from the start, for organized crime condemns crime against bus passengers, simple people just like them. Furthermore, strategically, this masked bandit explains that the robbery was not properly planned as it would be very unlikely to escape from the place where the bus stopped. Moreover, as the drama became the center of attention in the media, the chances of escaping diminished radically. This professional belittles Sandro as an “amateur”. His opinion matches other interviewees’ opinions who knew Sandro very well either as a companion, a student, an inmate, or a hostage. They all unanimously describe him as a human being different from the monster that was pictured during the event.

The assembly of the *in loco* recorded material in chronological order, mediated by contextualizing reports, allows us to reconsider the parallel development of the police and the kidnapper conduct. The film reveals that the presence of the media introduces a variable that paralyzed the police, leaving technical routine procedures to the wills of political leaders. Later on, after the arrest, it is only in the absence of cameras that the shameful act of revenge takes place.

The presence of the media also changes Sandro’s performance and in this specific case the film allows us to infer a transformation. The inside of the bus becomes like a back stage – where not everything can be seen or heard – creating a true drama performance. Reports by some of the victims confirm that Sandro not only acted, he also directed their performance. Throughout the event, step by step, he gradually embodied the stereotype of the bad character, for which he

had a perfect “*physique du rôle*”. This character gradually takes his real mask out, only to vest an invisible mask of a well known stereotype character. He started by wearing a hat, a mask, and sun glasses, and by speaking through the voice of his hostages. He ended up by exposing his opened face through the opened window of the bus. Through this privileged post he told Brazilians, and the world, about the most dramatic episodes of his impressive biography. Things he emphasized are relevant here.

As the chances of escaping become less likely, Sandro gives up hiding his face. He removes his mask, puts his face literally out of the bus window and yells. He addresses, not the hundreds of people that are watching the drama on the site, right behind the police cordon, but the millions of TV viewers who followed the developments of his dangerous operation live, on radio or TV.

The lines Sandro shouted are expressive. He refers to things he imagines he shares with the people he imagines as his viewers. He says that unlike fictional events in the American film he saw on TV the day before, his actions were for real. At the same time, a hostages’ testimony, who escaped, tell us the story of the negotiations going on back stage between these antagonistic characters. Sandro told the hostages – all women, since he had released the men – at his signal, to pretend they were being hit. In other words, he directed a play. He pretended to the outside public that he would shoot, while arranging with hostages to scream as if they were actually being hit. Inside the bus, hostages at that moment were lying on the floor, so that from the outside, their voices would be heard, but their bodies would not be seen.

As I suggested before, the police, in its turn, played the role of the paralyzed. The operation was marked by comings and goings. At the time there was even suspicion that the bullet that killed one of the hostages was shot not by Sandro, but by a policeman who would have killed the innocent pregnant woman instead of the hijacker. This was not true. The suspicion itself nonetheless reveals general lack of confidence in the police.

The presence of the media immobilized the police and mobilized the hijacker. At the same time, the media became, itself, a prisoner of the event. TV channels and radio stations felt compelled to broadcast the story, with the kind of frenzy that is typical of mediatic events.

Sandro in his turn was in a sense “prisoner of the lights”, or, in other words, prisoner of the attention given to him by the cameras. Gradually, as I say, he switched his moves from the emergency gathering of a little money, to the urgent performance of the role of the bad guy, which everybody who knew him and was interviewed in the film – including some of the hostages – agreed he was not.

Although, according to the reports by his street companions, he hardly mentioned anything about his past or his family, when facing public visibility through television cameras, Sandro denounced his tragic early years. He seemed to be aware that his story would capture attention. He denounced that he had been consistently beaten during his life. This boy as a victim had appropriated the situation, aiming to revert it. And in his hours of fame, he uttered a threatening speech. Again, his bad man’s discourse, vicious victim, according to him was inspired by American movies, contrasts with the perceptions that the hostages had of him – with a double game revealed by them – from the outside he pretended to shoot while inside there was a guarantee that he would not hurt anyone. The windows of the bus framed the stage.

As usual, live coverage explored the event without much contextual information. In order to go beyond this sensational approach, the film recovers the wicked victim’s trajectory. It intends to recover the identity of someone who miraculously survived several violent tragedies. It pictures someone whose life embodied the Brazilian social drama with incredibly sharp colors. The film sharply denounces a succession of extremely unjust circumstances – we see simulations of his witnessing of his mother’s murder; of the horrendous police massacre of street kids, during the night, in front of the Candelária church in downtown Rio de Janeiro. We are presented with images that show humiliation and abusive treatment of kids in the correction institution where Sandro was sent, and from where, not surprisingly, he escaped.

The film takes Sandro’s speech as a guide to tell his history. The characters he mentions, or that appear in the documents, are all interviewed. The hijacking event – beginning during the day and, as a bad omen, finishing in the dark – serves as a guideline to the film that cuts scenes in order to put things in context several times. With a dramatic music in the background, the film develops towards the tragic end as if there was no other way out. Sandro’s relationship with the camera

– the performance of a desperate man facing the spotlights, which is quite obvious in the film – is the knot that remains to be undone.

*Bus 174* sharply denounces enduring Brazilian social inequality as the root of an incredibly tragic life. It powerfully assembled TV images in a way that allows viewers to rethink a relevant event which would otherwise be rapidly forgotten. It does, with more sensitivity and fairness, the same role as the TV coverage did – it lets the boy direct the show – despite the police, government, and the media – and against his own chances of surviving.

The atmosphere of a tragic end is enhanced by setting up a narrative in melodramatic tone. *Bus 174* does not play with goodies or badies. Sandro appears as the victim of perverse social conditions. Viewers are presented with this terrible otherness for which they should feel co-responsible, at least for their complacency with discrimination.

In the case of *Bus 174*, the documentary material seems stronger than fiction. Sandro was five when he saw his mother being stabbed. He never knew who his father was. As a rebel, he adopted the streets. He was the witness of another cruelty, this time carried out by policemen – the Candelária massacre. As a survivor the boy for a while, during what was perhaps the healthier period of his life, could count on a capoeira teacher from PUC, Rio de Janeiro Catholic University. Addicted, he went back on the streets. In the absence of a mother, he adopted one. He promised that she would be proud of him one day. The tone of the music highlights the path as an inevitable tragedy.

*Bus 174* is powerfully disturbing. The question it raises, though, is how to disarticulate this complex conundrum that associates poverty, race, gender and violence with fear? Would it be possible to think about aesthetical ways of disarticulating these common sense connections?

## **5. The Politics of Representation**

The idea here is to try an analytical approach that could be used for the analysis of other contemporary Brazilian productions that, either dealing with fiction and/or documentary, express different ways of appropriating mechanisms of producing film and television representation. As I suggested in the introduction, the idea is that different



contemporary works reveal different forms and degrees of appropriation of the media. Dispute over the control of who represents what and how seems to play an increasingly crucial importance in contemporary Brazil. In this dispute, representations about poverty, race, gender and violence play a strategic role. The most successful films in the so-called revival phase can be understood from this point of view. The city is, in this sort of universe, privileged scenery, sometimes even with protagonist roles. Popular neighborhoods or, more specifically, *favelas* are at the center of these elaborations.

*Favelas* have, as discussed earlier in this paper, been pictured in the Brazilian movies from a very early period. Films by Nelson Pereira dos Santos – considered a hallmark in the history of the Brazilian cinema, precisely because of his search for urban landscapes – expanded the use of *favelas*, already present in other forms of artistic expression, such as painting, to cinema. From Grande Otelo's character in *Rio Zona Norte* (1957), a pioneering modern film, to local actors representing local characters in *City of God* (2002), there is a whole itinerary of representations to be discussed. During this development, the way of representing *favelas* has changed, as did the relationship among those who make films and those who are represented in films. My hypothesis, to be further investigated, is that the allegorical representation of violence that marked "new cinema" movies gave way to documentary forms.

In an allegorical register, cinema novo used violence to introduce a different element compared to the national commonsensical representation – in which Brazil was seen, essentially, as a peaceful, "cordial" country.<sup>18</sup> In documentary contemporary register, violence comes to the forefront of national representation.

Studies of reception conducted in contexts of social discrimination and intense media coverage, suggest different heterodox ways of interacting with printed and electronic means of communication in an intense move to dispute the control over the means of producing representation. Acknowledging this "politics of representation" leads one to think of aesthetic manifestations as expressions of specific relations that viewers and producers establish around special articulations be-

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18 Classic sociological interpretations stress the interpenetration of public and private relations as a founding basis of "cordial men", and a tolerant nation.

tween sounds and images. In this sense, performance embodies – captures and expresses – conflicts. Different cases express different arrangements.

In the long run, when inquiring about formal concrete arrangements in terms of expression of articulations between certain characters that seek, one way or the other, to control the mechanisms of constructing their representation, we open a path to rethinking the idea of the society of spectacle as proposed by Guy Debord and that, in a diluted manner and lacking ulterior re-elaborations, has served as a reference to different sorts of work, in distinct theoretical perspectives, which seek somehow to place the imaginary in the context of contemporary phenomenon.

Contemporary films deal with different strategies to represent, to talk about violence and poverty. Some experiences, as the Kinoforum workshops or the ones that led to the film “Prisoners of the Iron Bars” (*Prisioneiros da grade de ferro*) try to transfer, to the inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods and to the inmates of the demolished prison Carandiru respectively, technical “know how” in order to stimulate this poor, black “other” to make their own films. Experiences of the same sort have been conducted among native Americans, Australians, and Brazilians (Ginsburg 1993). In Brazil the project “Video nas aldeias” pioneered this kind of experience.<sup>19</sup> *Prisioneiro*, the Kinoforum workshops, among many others, bring this experience to urban contexts of conflict and social discrimination – such as prisons and poor neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo metropolis.

Feature fiction films pose a different order of questions, nonetheless, they can also be thought of in terms of a different appropriation of the mechanisms of making representations. Like *Bus 174*, *City of God* (2002) can be thought of as following the paths to *favelas* opened by *News of a private war*. Both films have the same co-director, Kátia Lund, who coordinated relations with local people. *City of God* is based on a fictional auto-ethnographic book by Paulo Lins, a former resident of the neighbourhood. Lins worked as a research assistant with anthropologist Alba Zaluar who did research in the *Cidade de Deus* neighborhood. His book departs from documentary material to

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19 See the catalogue of the recent Video nas Aldeias exhibit at CCBB in Rio de Janeiro.

fragmented novel form where he tells a series of segmented cases. The story lacks a clear beginning, middle or end. It reveals, from an insider's point of view, the universe of barbarism that has been taking place in everyday life in this *favela*. A situation that is common to contemporary large Brazilian cities. Curiously, at least in São Paulo, in technical terms, *Cidade de Deus* would be classified as a *conjunto habitacional*, a *project*, or, in British terms, a *council estate*, as it is not a self-constructed illegal assemblage of shacks, but a government-built housing project on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro city. Book and film use of the word *favela* may be seen as marking a shift in an insider's tendency to despise the word due to its pejorative symbolic meaning.

The script, written by Bráulio Pedroso, selects and condenses characters. It articulates a history with a classic narrative, which systematizes the trajectory of the local criminals – starting from past times of inconsequential roguery to contemporary times of pulp fiction violence style. However, beyond this systematic narrative, the film is the result of a year of laboratory sessions with the actors, who were local residents of Rio de Janeiro *favelas*, organized in the NGO *Nós do cinema*. For these boys, who are candidates to become 'Sandro', representing a 'Sandro' in the film is a way of playing out the role of Sandro. During the laboratory, this amateur-professional cast improvised speeches which were incorporated by the director and the screenwriter, added to twelve successive versions of the script. Throughout this long and intense building process, the actors, in some ways characters of themselves, transferred to the film the texture of their everyday life – especially through body language and oral expression. In this way, it is possible to say that there was some sort of symbiosis among actors, director and screenwriter – an unequal one, as the hierarchy is quite clear. Director and scriptwriter, plus editor (in the post-production phase) retained the authorial prerogative of deciding what to keep and what to leave out. But *City of God* inaugurated a "method" that was afterwards followed in the television series *City of men*. According to the method the script is based on ethnographic on-site research. Scripts describe situations. Lines are improvised by young actors on the set. Actual shooting follows two or three rehearsals of each scene.

Fast pace editing of this well-constructed story played by local unknown actors who speak their own slang and act according to their own codes, shot on location, results in a powerful film. A sharp picture of a deeply rooted myth, which associates violence and poverty, turns out as verisimilar reality. The result is a work that uses fast paced language, using an aesthetic that many despised as pure advertising, perhaps because it is clean and efficient, and giving a sense of authenticity and a documentary appeal. Mostly, *City of God* resembles the story based on the insertion of these “authentic” elements.

The case of *Carandiru* is different, even though there are similarities with *City of God*. The most recent film by Héctor Babenco, as much as Fernando Meirelles, is equally based on an ethnographic report of someone who, in some ways, shares the prison experience as an insider. Drauzio Varella, the doctor who with this book revealed the writers’ side of his professional activity, sought with his book to explain the catastrophic massacre that in one day interrupted dramatically the routine of the prison where he worked, killing 111 of his prisoner patients. Drauzio’s story cannot be seen as a report of someone “from within”, as he was doing voluntary work, visiting everyday. However, he has a sort of specific knowledge that makes him more a voice “from within” than our own. There is an inside/outside ambiguity in the book, implying some appropriation of the production mechanisms of the news. The “authentic” experience of the doctor inside the prison gives credibility to his report from inmates and readers. The doctor’s initiative, sharing his apprehension, and the act of barbarism from the State that ordered the invasion of the prison by military police during São Paulo state-governor Antonio Fleury’s administration, was an editorial success. As the doctor of the prison, the author talks from an ambivalent point of view – he is an insider that leaves every day. He has a position of authority as a doctor. But he knows the inmates by their names, he knows how to find his way in the entanglement of cells, hallways and pavilions.

The film is therefore based on a report that involves some appropriation, even if it is a “half-one”. *Carandiru* is based on Drauzio Varella’s personal experience as a doctor in the prison – a mix of being an insider and an outsider that gave him a privileged perspective of the events that took place in the traumatic massacre of 1992, an extreme case of state violence. The doctor becomes a chronicler after

elaborating the experience he saw in the destruction of the atmosphere he once knew. Although the cinema version has weakened the role of the writer/doctor as an insider/outsider, *Carandiru*, as *City of God*, is the result of a professional-personal elaboration of an insider/outsider. Born and raised in the 'City of God', Paulo Lins talks about his community first as a anthropologist researcher and then as a novelist. His story contains documentary and fiction, ethnography and literary characteristics. The film maintains the ambiguity. There is, as mentioned before, the amateur actors cast, who elaborated the dialogues in consecutive versions of the script that were re-elaborated after laboratory sessions. The soundtrack is marked by rap music. The filming in the *favelas* transformed the locations as another element of reality in the film's narrative.

Eduardo Coutinho's film *Santo Forte* (*Strong Saint*, 1999) and *Babilônia 2000* (*Babylon 2000*) is also part of this cinematographic experience rediscovering the *favelas*. Here the issue is not violence. The first film is based on Patrícia Monforte's anthropological research that reveals the religious universe of the *favelas*. The second one goes to the *favelas* to document the resident's oral reflections concerning the turn of the millennium. In both cases, the initiative, the agenda and the characters' selection were concentrated in the hands of the producers and the director who retain the initiative of the filming process. But the objective here is to document something that could be denominated as "cinematographic encounter". To make the film is seen as a relation. The film documents an interaction among the team, including the director-interviewer, and the characters. It takes what was said as an expression of that moment. They also express the experience on location. The discovery of the *favela* after the trafficking. Eduardo Coutinho's *Santo Forte* is also from the same year – and also shot in a favela with characters from there – but the theme here is religion and the priority is the chat and not much action. *Babilônia* was filmed in 1999.

The different ways in which the people in these films appropriate the production mechanisms of their representation configure different strategies, crystallizing in different aesthetic proposals. It departs from the texture of the films in itself to analyze in what ways it expresses forms of appropriating the representation mechanisms. It is not the case here to replace the analysis of the aesthetic articulation of these

works with an ideological discussion about the relations involved in the production process of each work. Quite the contrary, the aim is to understand the dispute for control of constructing mechanisms of representation as an intrinsic dimension of making documentaries, which in many cases justifies the use of fictional conventions.

It is not the case here to judge the presence of cameras. Conversely, it is the case of inquiring about the elements surrounding them. The idea here is to propose an analytical criterion for the current productions, different forms of appropriating the production mechanisms of representation in recent documentary and fictional works. This paper dealt specifically with the film *Bus 174*. The specific case reveals the contradictory ways in which the TV cameras end up stimulating certain behavior – not so much for what is going to be shown, but for the fact of going on air itself. Therefore, the sense of breaking with the invisibility that had characterized the character's life, with recurring victim positions, witnesses of bizarre tragedies, stimulates the addicted boy to develop a performance for the cameras. For this documental performance, negotiated in the realm of live news, embodying a persistent role in the Brazilian culture, especially in the time we live. Sandro embodies a stereotype and takes benefit as much as he can of the capacity to cause fear. During his '15 minutes' or so of fame, the rebellious boy immobilized the police, divided by divergent orientations, paralyzed by the impossibility of killing a transgressor live on TV to the whole country, as one interviewee reveals – the technically advisable shot would be to hit the head causing a fast and certain death without facilitating any action of the kidnapper against the hostages. However, a shot of that kind could have undesirable effects in the video, such as a cranial explosion. The police and the state government became hostages of what they could imagine as a negative repercussion of an aggressive act in the eyes of the public. The boy became a hostage of the character that he embodied, infuriating the police, humiliated by the inability to act when live TV is present. On the other hand, the presence of the cameras guaranteed a certain survival. It is possible to conceive that if the police car had a camera, the murder would not have taken place. Conversely, the same cameras that guaranteed Sandro's celebrity, forced him into a performance that could not envision another way out but the tragic end that happened.

*Bus 174* allows these kind of speculations, but perhaps it could have gone a little bit further concerning the disarticulation of preconceived notions that surely connects the violent social order and its representations. Would it be possible to deal with the case without falling into the space that flirts with the melodramatic tradition, opposing victim and criminal, in some ways justifying violent acts by the lack of social dignity? Again, in concrete terms, the question is how to escape these traps? How to dismantle the convention that makes the media easy to manipulate, especially when representing violent acts? How to create other mechanisms, different from the attainment of violent acts, in order to set television and cinema guidelines?

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